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Citation for published version:

Peterson, J 2018, 'Present at the Destruction? The Liberal Order in the Trump Era', *The International Spectator*, vol. 53, no. 1, pp. 28-44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2018.1421295>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/03932729.2018.1421295](https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2018.1421295)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

The International Spectator

Publisher Rights Statement:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in 'International Spectator' on 6th March 2018, available online: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03932729.2018.1421295>.

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PRESENT AT THE DESTRUCTION? The Liberal Order in the Trump Era

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Forthcoming in *International Spectator*, 53/1, 2018.

Abstract:

The election of Donald Trump in 2016 sent shock waves across political classes globally and prompted debates about whether his 'America first' agenda threatened the liberal international order. During his first year in office, Trump seemed determined to undermine the hallmarks of the liberal international order: democracy, liberal economics and international cooperation. So, are we witnessing the emergence of a "post-liberal" and "post-American" era? Four sources of evidence help frame – if not answer – the question: history, the crisis of liberal democracy, Trump's world view, and the power of civil society (globally and nationally) to constrain any US President. They yield three main judgements. First, continuity often trumps change in US foreign policy. Second, the liberal international order may have been more fragile pre-Trump than was widely realised. Third, American power must be put at the service of its own democracy if the US is to become the example to the world it used to be.

Keywords: US foreign policy, US politics, liberal order, multipolarity

Any investigation of the current role of the United States (US) in the liberal international order must begin by acknowledging the utter shock to which many Americans and political classes globally awoke on 9 November 2016, when Donald Trump's election as US President was confirmed. Not only did nearly all pollsters and political professionals consider Trump's possible path to victory so narrow – everything that went right for him in battleground states had to go right – that it was almost certain that Hillary Clinton would be elected.¹ The shock never really subsided during Trump's first year in office. Trump's 'America First' campaign rhetoric quickly took on tangible foreign policy consequences. Even before taking office, Trump announced that the US would pull out of the painstakingly negotiated Transpacific Partnership (TPP). He repeatedly threatened to do the same with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). One of his first acts as President was to try to impose a travel ban on nationals of seven mainly Muslim countries. Then came the bombshell of US withdrawal from the Paris agreement on climate change.

¹ As of 30 October 2017, nearly a year after the 2016 US election, the highly influential *New York Times* website "The Upshot: Who Will be President?" was still listing its 8 November 2016 estimation that Clinton's chances of winning were 85%. See <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/upshot/presidential-polls-forecast.html>.

Reports in summer 2017 that North Korea had successfully miniaturized a nuclear warhead on top of multiple successful long distance missile tests led to fears of real bombshells falling. Trump thundered that a US military response was “locked and loaded” and North Korean provocation would “be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen”.² Soon afterwards, one (unabashedly liberal) commentator termed it an “inescapable fact” that “on November 9th, the United States elected a dishonest, inept, unbalanced, and immoral human being as its President and Commander-in Chief”.³ Trump’s America appeared to have abandoned the traditional US role of bolstering and reinforcing the global liberal order at which the first postwar US Secretary of State claimed – with considerable pride and justification – he had been Present at the Creation.⁴ In fact, Trump seemed bent on destroying it. Was that inescapable, too?

It obviously is risky to try to extrapolate from a sample size of one year to judge whether the present era marks the beginning of what Riccardo Alcaro terms a “post-liberal” and “post-American” age in his Introduction to this issue.⁵ A more profitable exercise is to consider what evidence we have about factors determining how the tectonic plates of the international order may be shifting now and might shift in the future. One source of evidence is history, especially the relative weight of agency versus structure in the evolution of US foreign policy (see the first section below). Another is the rise of multipolarity as an indelible trend in recent history. Relatedly, we have had ample indication over time to judge whether and how the emergence of non- or quasi-democracies as rising powers constitutes “a wider crisis across the liberal democratic world”⁶ (second section). Accordingly, we have to consider whether Trump is, according to the leading liberal IR scholar John Ikenberry, “less a cause than a consequence of the failings of liberal democracy”. Judging whether he is right means interrogating how and why escalating nationalism, populism, inequality and protectionism have fused in Trump’s worldview and with what consequences for the global order (considered in the third section). Finally, we can reflect on how state institutional or non-state actors – civil society, whether domestic (in the US) or global – might deploy their own considerable power to shape US foreign policy outcomes (the last section).

No one can yet know whether Alcaro’s vision of a “post-liberal, post-American” future is prescient or not. But he is hardly alone in thinking, along with the vastly experienced US diplomat and analyst Richard Haas, that “it is difficult not to take seriously the possibility that one historical

² Quoted in CNN, “Trump Warns North Korea: US Military ‘Locked and Loaded’”, 11 August 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/08/10/politics/trump-north-korea/index.html>.

³ Remnick, “The Divider”, 28.

⁴ Acheson, Present at the Creation.

⁵ Alcaro, “Liberal Order and its Contestations”, x ???.

⁶ Ikenberry, “Plot Against American Foreign Policy”, 3 (same reference for the next sentence).

era is ending and another beginning”.⁷ We can at least begin to get an analytical handle on how likely such prognostications might be right, and to what extent they might be right. In other words, how much less liberal and less American is the next historical era likely to be? We may well be living through a period of crisis in which the postwar liberal order faces unprecedented peril. Equally, connections that bind together the liberal order – arguably wider, deeper and denser by an order of magnitude than ever before in history – may mean it is more durable than it sometimes appears.

The liberal order and IR theory: agency vs structure

There are few other subjects of study in the political world in which history becomes more of a testing ground for the relative explanatory power of agency – of individuals or states to influence their environment – as opposed to structure: environments that contain pressures that bear down so hard on states or statespersons that they effectively determine their behaviour. Structure is usually the winner in international relations (IR) theory. Most IR theorists describe, explain and predict outcomes in international politics based on the distribution of power in the international system of states. Kenneth Waltz’s neo-realism is perhaps the most widely-debated variant of ‘structural realism’ in that it assumes that states are unitary-rational actors competing in a state of international anarchy for power.⁸ Since states are functionally similar in pursuing security in an insecure world, they may even be described (theoretically) as “billiard balls”. What is inside them – democratic or authoritarian regimes, wise or foolish statespersons and so on – literally drops out of the theoretical explanation. Structure, determined by how power is distributed between states, is (nearly) all that matters.

Of course, theoretical assumptions are not descriptions of reality. Moreover, liberal and constructivist IR theorists challenge many (neo)realist assumptions about structure and agency. For them, the two not only shape but create each other. In other words, agents and structure are “mutually constitutive: states make the structures, and structure makes states”.⁹ So, by extension (in the classic constructivist view), “anarchy is what states make of it”.¹⁰

For all of their differences, a leading (liberal) theorist insists that all IR theories are “systemic theories in a Waltzian sense”.¹¹ That is, all theorise on the basis of the distribution of power between states, thus privileging structure over agency. Crucially, however, liberals (and

⁷ Haas, *A World in Disarray*, xii. It should be noted that Haas advised Trump on foreign policy during the 2016 campaign and was even considered for an appointment in his administration, although Haas subsequently soundly criticised the administration for its unprofessional ‘ad-hoc-ery’ in making foreign policy. See Haberman, “Donald Trump Held Briefing with Haas”, Appelbaum, “Trump’s Foreign Policy ‘Adhocracy’”.

⁸ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

⁹ Buzan, “The Level of Analysis Problem”, 214.

¹⁰ Wendt, “Anarchy is what states make of it”.

¹¹ Moravcsik, “Liberal international relations theory”, 7.

constructivists) take a different view than realists about how structure constrains agents in modern IR. The liberal order created in the postwar period features a more or less robust international society. Recalling Vincent's memorable analogy, it acts as an egg carton that protects states (cast as fragile eggs) from smashing into each other and thus cracking and disintegrating.¹² International society is buttressed by advanced regional cooperation and international organisations and law that have steadily gained in strength, authority and legitimacy. The liberal international system of states limits the agency of potential change agents such as Trump because all states, including powerful ones like the US, benefit from its existence.

If we take 1945 as 'year zero' of the current international order and then trace its evolution from there, we could plausibly conclude that a progressively more forceful liberal structure emerged that increasingly constrained the choices of agents or statespersons. That was the case at least for one side in a bipolar Cold War, the alliance of (mostly) democratic states consisting of the West plus Australasian states including Japan. On the other side, after (first) the Warsaw Pact and (then) the Soviet Union collapsed in 1989-91, virtually all states sought to become members of the liberal order. After all, joining was voluntary and the promise of peace and prosperity incentivised states to accept its rules and norms of behaviour. From that point onwards, most statespersons embraced the three hallmarks of the liberal international order: democracy, liberal economics and international cooperation.

The result, significantly spurred by technological advance, became a movement for which the shorthand term is globalisation. Realists such as Waltz questioned how far globalisation really had advanced, as well as whether it was powerful or durable enough to qualify anarchy.¹³ But he and other realists were swimming against a tide of claims that the liberal order had advanced to the point where its norms eclipsed and delegitimised the inter-state conflict that was endemic to earlier eras of anarchy.

Of course, intensified intra-state conflict was an almost inevitable consequence of the end of the Cold War. States whose boundaries had been more or less randomly drawn in the past – Yugoslavia, Somalia, Rwanda and Iraq – descended into civil wars (in the case of Saddam Hussein's Iraq, forestalled only by brutal internal repression). For a time, US-led humanitarian intervention to try to limit the bloodshed of internecine conflicts appeared to become something like a norm of the liberal order. It even provided a (flimsy) measure of liberal political cover to the US-led invasion of Afghanistan after the terrorist atrocities in New York and Washington on 11 September 2001 (9/11). The George W. Bush administration extolled the overthrow of a Taliban government that repressed

¹² Vincent, *Human Rights and International Relations*, 123-5.

¹³ Waltz, "Globalization and governance".

women and imposed a ruthless form of fundamentalist Islamist rule. In retrospect, however, the contemporary debate about the durability of the liberal order is rooted in an eventuality for which that order was entirely unequipped: a massive terrorist attack by a stateless network on what many considered the most asymmetrically powerful hegemon in modern history.

The list of liberal norms that were quickly jettisoned by the US was breath-taking. A US President declared a 'war on terror'; that is, on a tactic instead of an enemy. Other states were "with or against" the US in the prosecution of the war, regardless of how Washington chose to prosecute it. The Geneva Convention and other landmark human rights agreements were brazenly violated in the treatment of enemy combatants and resort to extreme surveillance methods. The 2002 US National Security Strategy (NSS), unveiled one year and one day after 9/11, arrogated to the US the right to pre-emptive military action against perceived threats purely on the basis of US intelligence and without obligation to consult other states.¹⁴ American hegemony obviously entailed special privileges enjoyed only by the US. But the list of privileges never included the ability to act as an agent untethered by the globally accepted constraints of the liberal order without undermining its structural foundations.

One consequence was that after 9/11, competition between competing traditional doctrines of US foreign policy was turned upside down. Mead handily identifies four discrete visions of America's role in the world.¹⁵ The first is Hamiltonianism, inspired by the first US Treasury Secretary, which prioritises America's international commercial interests, embraces a balance of power, and takes an essentially realist view of IR. The second is Wilsonianism, the brainchild of Woodrow Wilson, which seeks a global civil society and pursues international cooperation, democracy and human rights with almost missionary zeal. Third is Jeffersonianism, based on the third US President's conviction that foreign entanglements should never be allowed to damage precious US political institutions and traditions; put simply: "the object of foreign policy should be to defend [American] values at home rather than extend them abroad".¹⁶ Fourth, Jacksonianism embraces the militaristic, hawkish, populist and honour-bound doctrine of the seventh US President, Andrew Jackson. Mead ascribes what he views as the success of the US as a global power to healthy debate and competition between these four schools. They ensure that US foreign policy is a "symphony...rather than a solo".¹⁷

However, post-9/11, the Bush administration appeared to embrace a sort of Wilsonianism on steroids: a unipolar vision in which American power would be used aggressively to combat

¹⁴ Dannreuther and Peterson, *Security Strategy and Transatlantic Relations*.

¹⁵ Mead, *Special Providence*.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 175.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

tyranny, promote freedom and fight a war on terrorism. Its leading neoconservatives (Vice-President Richard Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz) blithely predicted that Iraqis would greet invading US troops with flowers. Freed of Saddam's tyranny, Iraq could quickly become a "beacon of democracy".¹⁸ The demonstration effect would unleash a democratic "wave of change" in the Middle East.¹⁹ One group of liberal IR thinkers, with considerable and palpable anger, poured scorn on Bush's foreign policy for tragically betraying Wilson's vision of a multilateral, cooperative, rules-based order.²⁰

We now know that the link of causation between 9/11 and Saddam's Iraq was made almost immediately by Bush's neoconservative foreign policy advisors.²¹ The disastrous aftermath of the US-led 2003 invasion was mirrored by a surge in anti-Americanism globally that became a primary concern of IR scholars within a few years.²² The election of Barack Obama as US President in 2008 – and again in 2012 – was in key respects a balm to America's wounded international reputation. Yet, given that his rise from obscurity to the White House occurred largely because of his self-identification as the anti-war candidate, it was always likely that he would leave office as the first post-hegemonic US President. Every attempt Obama made to reassert US global leadership can be matched with a case of retrenchment. Assertive US diplomacy on climate change sits next to Obama's diplomatic disengagement from Iraq – by one view "his only interest in Iraq was ending the war"²³ – thus creating the conditions for the rise of ISIS in 2013. Obama's (reluctant) commitment to NATO airstrikes on Libya in 2011 (with the US "leading from behind") contrasts with his undelivered commitment to attack Assad's Syria if it crossed his "red line" and used chemical weapons against its own people. Revealingly, those straining to identify an "Obama doctrine" by the end of his Presidency were left with little more than his own insistence "that the first task of an American President in the post-Bush international arena was don't do stupid sh_t".²⁴

Realists can claim analytical purchase on Obama's failure as a change agent in US foreign policy, as well as the fraying of the liberal international order. After all, international politics is a realm of "recurrence and repetition"²⁵ in which structure trumps agency and any notion that states can institutionalise cooperation in the pursuit of absolute gains is illusory. Meanwhile, liberals are almost desperately left to insist that "in terms of wealth creation, the provision of physical security and economic stability, and the promotion of human rights and political protection, no other

¹⁸ George W. Bush quoted in Khalaf, "Iraq's difficult decade of democracy".

¹⁹ UK Foreign Secretary Jack Straw quoted in BBC News, "Iraq helped 'Mid-East democracy'".

²⁰ Ikenberry *et al.*, *Crisis of American Foreign Policy*.

²¹ Woodward, *Bush at War*, 42.

²² See Farber, *What They Think of Us*; Katzenstein and Keohane, *Anti-Americanism in World Politics*.

²³ Sky, *The Unravelling*, 338.

²⁴ Goldberg, "The Obama doctrine".

²⁵ Wight, "Why is there no International Theory?", 123-5.

international order in history comes close” to the present one.²⁶ Still, Obama clearly presided over a period of declining US ownership of the international order, not least because of secular changes in the distribution of power amongst the components in an increasingly multipolar world.

Multipolarity: new winners, old losers?

In 2004, a leading (liberal) intellectual and historian, Timothy Garton Ash, published a prophetic work on the “crisis of the West” post-Iraq. He was ahead of the curve in foreseeing that “the old Atlantic-centred West, which has been shaping the world since about 1500, probably has no more than twenty years left in which it will still be the main world-shaper”.²⁷ Most of that time has now passed. Meanwhile, the European Union (EU) is still reeling and presently fixated on ‘Brexit’: the shock vote of the United Kingdom (UK) to leave the EU in its June 2016 referendum. There is no sign that Trump’s America will seek to renew the transatlantic alliance, or even its alliance with the UK, especially after slapping more than 200 per cent tariffs on Bombardier, a Canadian airline manufacturer that employs 4000 workers in the UK’s economic backwater of Northern Ireland.

Trump’s refusal even to mention the US Article 5 Treaty commitment (an attack on one is attack on all) at the unveiling of a memorial to the victims of 9.11 at NATO’s new headquarters in Brussels – despite agreeing with his foreign policy team that it would feature in his speech²⁸ – marked a truly low moment in US-European relations. Soon afterwards, Germany’s Chancellor Angela Merkel spoke for many in Europe in urging “we must fight for our future on our own, for our destiny as Europeans...The times in which we could fully rely on others – they are pretty much over”.²⁹ There were at least rumblings about a possible renewal of the EU post-Brexit and following the election of the strongly pro-EU Emmanuel Macron as French President in 2017. They were reflected (for instance) in the commitment in the EU’s 2016 Global Strategy (its equivalent of the US NSS) to European “strategic autonomy”. But whether or not Europe is on a long-term downward spiral in terms of its international power (as many think it is), the continent seems to be drifting towards more independence in IR because Trump’s America First agenda effectively precludes close transatlantic ties.

If the West’s collective decline signals a global power shift, then there’s little debate about to where much of the power is shifting: Xi Jinping’s China. By October 2017, The Economist was unqualified in deeming Xi “the world’s most powerful man”.³⁰ The five-yearly Communist Party

²⁶ Ikenberry, “Plot against American foreign policy”, 3.

²⁷ Garton Ash, *Free World*, 192.

²⁸ Glasser, “Trump team blindsided by NATO speech”.

²⁹ Quoted in Smale and Erlanger. “Merkel is looking past Trump”.

³⁰ *The Economist*, “The world’s most powerful man”, 14 October 2017, 11.

Congress of that month consolidated Xi's power as no Chinese leader had achieved post-Mao by writing his name and dogma into China's constitution. In a nearly three and half hour speech to open the congress, Xi highlighted how China had "taken a driving seat in international cooperation on climate change". He also insisted that China did not seek hegemony, but equally vowed that "no one should expect China to swallow anything that undermines its interests".³¹

Xi's assertiveness seemed carefully calibrated to the dawn of the Trump era. He had earlier endeared himself to global elites at the January 2016 Davos World Economic Forum by staking China's claim to be a champion of globalisation, free trade and the Paris climate change agreement. Meanwhile, China's Belt and Road Initiative promised huge investments in railways, ports, power stations and other infrastructure that would create jobs and growth across the Eurasian continent. It acted to reinforce the impression that the power shift towards China was mostly economic, involving little additional 'soft power', or the ability to attract other states and convince them to want for themselves what China wanted for them.³²

But China may now wield more soft power than might be assumed, especially given the emergence of Trump's America. At home, Xi has tightened controls over China's nascent civil society, presided over increased human rights abuses, and kept the Chinese economy firmly in control of state-run enterprises. The effect has been to reinforce the rise of a new competitor to liberal democracy as a political form that states can emulate: the 'Chinese model' combining authoritarianism, state-led capitalism and nationalism. After all, no other system in history has ever successfully pulled so many people out of poverty. Any soft power that Xi's China wields has flowed from that empirical fact.

For his part, Donald Trump seems to admire Xi's ability to impose his personal will on China, phoning to congratulate him on the results of the 2017 party congress ahead of his own visit to Beijing. If we are concerned with how the US under Trump is positioning itself relative to China, two things seem clear. One is that Trump's personal admiration for Xi creates scope for compromise, if not cooperation, between the world's two most powerful states. A second is that nothing about Xi's China suggests that multipolarity is not on the rise as a fundamental fact of international politics.

If China's rise signals a reversal of the postwar era's progressive strengthening of international society – and a consequent loss of predictability – then the case of Russia is much less ambiguous. Russian military adventurism in, first, Georgia, and then, Ukraine in the early 21st century signalled the dawn of what many termed a "new Cold War" in Europe.³³ Allegations of

³¹ Quoted in Phillips, "Xi Jinping hails 'new era'".

³² Nye, *Soft Power*.

³³ One example amongst many is Osnos *et al.*, "Trump, Putin and New Cold War". See also Lucas, *The New Cold War*.

Russian interference in the 2016 US election, still under investigation at time of writing, are both astounding and unsurprising. Astounding because, if substantiated, the deployment of an authoritarian tactic entirely unthinkable in the modern liberal international order could mark a major escalation in a new Cold War.³⁴ Unsurprising because of the public statement of Vladimir Putin's choice for chief of the Russian army, Valery Gerasimov, in 2013 that stressed a "blurring of the differences between war and peace...The emphasis in the methods of confrontation being employed is shifting toward widespread use of political, economic, information...and other non-military measures".³⁵

From one perspective, Putin's "managed democracy" that mimics democratic parties, institutions and elections while the Kremlin tightly controls both politics and, perhaps more importantly, the economy has been necessitated by its declining, pre-modern economy and falling standards of living. With energy prices low and genuine Western solidarity producing economically painful sanctions after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Putin is playing a game he will inevitably lose. He has had to distract Russians with patriotic adventurism abroad, including in Ukraine, on Russia's border with NATO and in Syria's civil war. Russia is powerful enough to violate the norms of the liberal international order. But not with impunity and not for much longer. Short-term geopolitical muscle-flexing creates the appearance of Russian success in pushing towards a new multipolar order but shrouds a Russia that is fundamentally in decline.

From another perspective, Putin's methods have found admirers in EU countries such as Hungary, Slovakia and even – despite its profound suspicion of Russia – Poland. Governments in all three states have shifted towards "illiberal democracy", to use the term that Victor Orban, the autocratic Hungarian Prime Minister, openly avowed as his aspiration. Revealingly, Orban's most focused speech on the concept – the basis of which was ethnic nationalism – was delivered in 2014 in Romania to an audience of ethnic Hungarians. The speech excoriated liberal values for encouraging "corruption, sex and violence" and condemned non-governmental organisations as "paid political activists who are attempting to enforce foreign interests here in Hungary [sic]." Orban asserted that "the stars of the international analysts today are Singapore, China, India, Russia and Turkey".³⁶

Two questions arise from such a claim and list, even if the latter forms an ersatz group (outright or quasi-dictatorships along with democratic India). First, is the liberal international order being undermined from within by its constituent states? Has Huntington's "third wave" of

³⁴ Far less so, of course, during the Cold War international order when the US interfered in multiple democratic elections.

³⁵ Wright, *All Measures Short of War*, 765-72.

³⁶ Quoted in Freedom House, *Breaking Down Democracy*, 35.

democratisation³⁷ now gone into reverse as more states emulate autocratic methods? Second, even if its main members do not match Orban's "stars", are the agents of multipolarity accelerating their rise via concerted action by the so-called BRICs: Brazil, Russia, India and China (sometimes including South Africa – BRICS)? And, as an ancillary question, are Trump's own autocratic inclinations likely to fuel both of these fires?

The first question must be taken seriously. According to Freedom House, the democracy watchdog that receives US government funding but claims independence, more states have restricted than increased democratic freedoms every year since 2008. By its count, at least 25 fewer truly free democracies existed in 2016 than at the turn of the century.³⁸ At China's October 2017 National Congress, Xi Jinping explicitly claimed that the Chinese model offered "a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence".³⁹ Independence seemed a code word for autonomy from Western, particularly American, influence. A 2017 Freedom House report on "modern authoritarianism", which mostly focused on China and Russia, starkly stated that "a basic assumption behind the report is that modern authoritarianism will be a lasting feature of geopolitics" and that, moreover, "[a]uthoritarian systems will seek not just to survive, but to weaken and defeat democracy around the world".⁴⁰ The stakes may be higher than ever before for the ability of US democracy to demonstrate its resilience to the world under Trump.

The second question – ostensibly, are the BRICs a true alliance? – is easier to answer. As early as 2012, a senior Morgan Stanley analyst put the commonly-shared and rapid rise of the BRIC states down to an unusual and fleeting set of economic circumstances in the preceding decade.⁴¹ Of course, the convening of annual BRICS summits beginning in 2009, and the subsequent creation of a BRICs Development Bank in 2013 (to rival the International Monetary Fund) encouraged the rest of the world to sit up and take notice. But the BRICS Development Bank soon had to compete for finance with the China-inspired Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, after the latter was created in 2015. More generally, all of the BRICS countries face their own severe domestic political problems.⁴² Put simply, their interests in IR sometimes overlap, but are by no means identical. As Alcaro puts it, "The BRICS format...is no check on Western power. It is a means to manage inter-BRICS relations –

³⁷ Huntington, *The Third Wave*.

³⁸ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2017*.

³⁹ Quoted in Phillips, "Xi Jinping hails 'new era'".

⁴⁰ Freedom House, *Breaking Down Democracy*, 4.

⁴¹ Sharma, *Broken BRICS*.

⁴² Peterson *et al.*, "Multipolarity, multilateralism and leadership", 52-4.

which entail a good deal of competition, particularly along the Russia-China and China-India borders”.⁴³

The ancillary question – what might be the knock-on effects of Trump’s election and authoritarian sensibilities – is considerably more complicated. We need to reflect on both what his election means for the liberal international order as well as the robustness of American democracy to mitigate any tendency of his Presidency to undermine it. These two analytical tasks are tackled in the sections that follow.

Trump and the liberal democratic crisis

In a provocative analysis of the implications of Trump’s election (of special interest to some readers of this journal), Clementi and colleagues argue that it marked the “Italianization” of American politics.⁴⁴ Rejecting any suggestion that Trump’s rise could result in Mussolini-style authoritarianism, they instead find clear analogies between Trump and Italy’s longest-serving contemporary prime minister: Silvio Berlusconi. Both embraced similar brands of populism, shared personality traits, personalised politics as rarely seen before, and leveraged to their advantage deep anti-establishment sentiment.

Whether we accept the analogy or not, there are clear parallels between Berlusconi and Trump in how their domestic political programmes inevitably had/have consequences for foreign policy. While Berlusconi actively supported the US-led invasion of Iraq, his brand of politics also involved cosying up to Putin’s Russia and fomenting the rise in Euroscepticism in Italy. In Trump’s case, his America First mantra cast doubt on the US commitment to its traditional alliances and caused severe tensions and declining trust within them. His claim to represent directly and work for the interests of ordinary Americans who suffered from the economic “carnage” over which his predecessor allegedly presided threatened to lead to the embrace of protectionism or even mercantilism in US trade policy. The effects of the Great Recession, rising inequality, and advancing automation on America’s shrinking middle class, especially regionally concentrated in ‘rust belt’ states Trump had to (and did) win, created a perfect storm for turning attacks on free trade agreements such as NAFTA and TPP into tangible votes and strengthening Trump’s base. After taking office, Trump’s attacks on US manufacturers with planned investments in Mexico, his pledge to revive US coal mining, and blockage of appointments to the judicial apparatus of the World Trade Organisation had tangible effects on private sector planning within the US business community.⁴⁵

⁴³ Alcaro, “The paradoxes of liberal order”, 210-1.

⁴⁴ Clementi *et al.*, “Making America grate again”.

⁴⁵ The Trump administration continually blocked new appointments to the WTO dispute settlement body, its top arbiter of trade cases, in 2017 leading to concerns that the US was seeking a breakdown of the entire WTO

Whether moves even more damaging to the liberal international economic order are forthcoming is unclear at time of writing. Astonishingly, in the teeth of the crisis over North Korea's nuclear threats, reports circulated in autumn 2017 that Trump was considering abrogating the US bilateral free trade agreement with South Korea, a step that would have obviously negative strategic consequences.⁴⁶ US trade policy professionals were then shocked by a memo written by the top Trump trade advisor, Peter Navarro (previously co-author of polemical works such as *Death by China*⁴⁷), that linked declining US manufacturing capability to increases in abortion, spousal abuse, divorce, infertility, child poverty, opioid use, and crime on the basis of no data or evidence.⁴⁸ Credible reports emerged that Canadian and Mexican trade officials were being told by their US counterparts that they should not expect the US to be bound by WTO rules if Washington pulled out of NAFTA since the Trump administration failed to accept its constraints, just one sign amongst many that it wished to blow up global trade rules in order to shrink America's trade deficit.⁴⁹

Arguably, however, Trump's moves on the strategic side have threatened to do even more damage to the liberal international order. On NATO, North Korea, Iran and immigration, bedrock US commitments to international cooperation that have remained consistent over more than 60 years under administrations of both political parties risk being discarded if Trump thinks it would benefit him politically. The ideological consensus that has underpinned such US commitments is clearly fraying, with Democrats far more focused on domestic contestation of Trump's agenda than its foreign policy consequences. They, like Trump and the Republicans, could no doubt read polls that suggested 70 per cent of voters in 2016 wanted the next President to focus on domestic, not foreign policy. No fewer than 62 per cent thought "[s]ince the US is the most powerful nation in the world, we should go our own way in international matters, not worrying too much about whether other countries agree with us or not".⁵⁰ Trump's laser-like focus on America First as a slogan and agenda reflected not only his extraordinary raw political instincts. It also reflected how unprecedentedly fierce partisan contestation of Trump's domestic political agenda was feeding through to disintegration of the US postwar consensus on liberal internationalism and the belief that absolute gains were possible by being true to its principles. Thus far in the Trump-era US domestic political arena, there has been no one to defend them.

system. The EU's Trade Commissioner, Cecilia Malmström, accused the Trump administration of "killing the WTO from the inside". See Brunsden and Beattie, "Trump risks killing WTO".

⁴⁶ Thrush and Harris, "Trump mulls exit from South Korea".

⁴⁷ Navarro and Autry, *Death by China*.

⁴⁸ Paletta, "Internal White House documents allege".

⁴⁹ Porter, "Trump's endgame could end global rules".

⁵⁰ "US policy and politics. America's global role, superpower status", Pew Research Center, 4 May 2016, http://www.people-press.org/2016/05/05/1-americas-global-role-u-s-superpower-status/1_4/.

The problem, of course, is not confined to Trump's America. Trump-like nationalist-populists made gains in 2016-17 in Germany, Austria, France, Norway, Greece, Finland, the Philippines and Turkey. That is not even to mention the consolidation of power of such forces in the non-liberal democratic worlds of Hungary, Russia, China and elsewhere. It remains difficult to judge whether the trend is inexorable and unstoppable, with clearly damaging implications for the liberal international order. It could be just the product of a fleeting time when the Great Recession has provoked massive discontent in liberal democracies and flattered the models offered by non-democratic states. What is undeniable is that 2016 showed that – for now and possibly the foreseeable future – liberal internationalism simply does not pay domestically in US democratic politics.

Institutions and civil society: checks on Trump's agenda?

The aforementioned work on the "Italianization" of American politics is clear on what divides Italy from the US: "if Italy could have weathered the long Berlusconi era without too much lasting damage being inflicted upon the vitality of its democracy, then America, with its much more hearty network of institutional constraints upon executive power, will prove itself highly capable of accommodating its own version with much less difficulty".⁵¹ In short, the US model of democracy with its system of checks and balances is likely to limit the eccentricities of a rogue President. One source of constraint arises from the nature of the foreign policy team that any elected President must appoint and then rely upon.

Trump ran as a Republican Party outsider for the 2016 presidential nomination. His total lack of foreign policy experience meant he had to rely, at first, on amateurs for foreign policy advice. As late as August 2016, when Trump had the nomination locked up, no fewer than 50 senior GOP foreign policy professionals signed a public letter saying they would not serve in his administration because he would "put at risk our country's national security and well-being".⁵² One result was that one of Trump's top foreign policy advisors, Michael Flynn – former head of the US Defense Intelligence Agency, forced to resign by Obama because of his strange statements about Islamist terrorism – became Trump's National Security Advisor (NSA). Flynn was forced to resign again, this time as NSA, after 24 days for lying about his paid work for Turkey and contacts with Russian agents. Trump, the candidate, was also advised on foreign policy by George Papadopoulos, a 28-year old Greek-American who was swept up, as was Flynn, in the federal investigation of Russian interference in the 2016 US election, pleading guilty to lying to federal agents about his own contacts with Russia.

⁵¹ Clementi *et al.*, "Making America grate again", 515.

⁵² Sanger and Haberman, "50 GOP officials warn Donald Trump".

Trump then had little choice but to turn to foreign policy professionals who agreed to serve in his administration. The result was a so-called “axis of adults” who, together, acted to moderate his eccentric statements on foreign policy: James Mattis, a former military general, as Defense Secretary; Herbert McMaster, another respected former general as National Security Advisor; and Rex Tillerson – former CEO of Exxon/Mobile – as Secretary of State.⁵³ Trump clashed with Tillerson over North Korea and other issues, especially after Tillerson reportedly referred to Trump as a “moron” in private meetings, leading Trump to challenge Tillerson to an IQ test that Trump was sure he could win. Still, Tillerson brushed off the drama and doggedly insisted that he would pursue a diplomatic solution on North Korea up until “the first bombs drop”. Similarly, Mattis reassured US Asian allies that diplomacy remained “our preferred course of action” and that the US commitment to deterrence and defending its allies was “ironclad”. After the May 2017 NATO summit debacle, McMaster co-authored a Wall Street Journal article that was widely condemned by US foreign policy professionals for claiming (wrongly) that Trump had “reconfirm[ed] America’s commitment to NATO and Article 5” at the Brussels summit and baldly denying the existence of a “global community”. Trump’s vision of IR instead consisted of “nations, nongovernmental actors and businesses [that] engage and compete for advantage”. Still, the piece took as its title “America first doesn’t mean America alone” and declared that “strong alliances and economically thriving partners” were a “vital American interest”.⁵⁴

Trump’s America First agenda has also had its roughest edges at least moderated on trade policy. Navarro’s peculiarities, as well as those of trade sceptic Robert Lighthizer, in charge of the renegotiation of NAFTA as US Trade Representative, were reined in by more moderate voices. They included Gary Cohn, head of the National Economic Council, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, Trump’s chief of staff, John Kelly (another former military general), and even McMaster as NSA. Cohn managed to block multiple mooted moves to abrogate NAFTA unilaterally and impose steep tariffs on US imports of steel. Kelly folded the newly-created Office of Trade and Manufacturing Policy headed by Navarro into the National Economic Council, thus requiring Navarro to report to Cohn. At a certain point, whatever their political agenda, any US President must come to grips with how promises made during an electoral campaign clash with the hard graft of actually governing, and turn to foreign policy professionals for workable compromises. The professional US foreign policy community is generally conservative with few sharp differences of view between Republican and Democratic operatives. Consequently, far more continuity than change in policy occurs even

⁵³ Mann, “The adults in the room”. As a caveat, by the end of 2017, it was widely reported that Trump was on the verge of firing Tillerson and replacing him with CIA chief Michael Pompeo.

⁵⁴ McMaster and Cohn, “America first doesn’t mean America alone”.

when partisan control of the White House changes, and even when a severely partisan figure like Trump comes to office.

Moreover, other even more institutionalised and powerful constraints on presidential prerogative exist in US government, even in foreign policy where that prerogative is often most pronounced. The power of the US courts was on full display when Trump rolled out Executive Order 13769: the travel ban on seven predominantly Muslim countries. The ban was repeatedly blocked by federal courts over the course of more than a year despite multiple revisions by the Trump administration, before finally being put in place. Trump's ban on transgender service in the US military met much the same fate. A federal judge blocked its main provisions and additionally blasted the President for announcing the policy on Twitter "without any of the formality or deliberative processes that generally accompany the development and announcement of major policy changes that will gravely affect the lives of many Americans".⁵⁵ The Pentagon chose to low-ball the ban by subjecting it to a "policy review", before –after multiple court judgments – it announced that transgender people would be free to join the US military as from 2018, whatever Trump wanted or had said.

On Iran, Trump's refusal to certify the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the multilateral nuclear deal, was no more than a Presidential notification to Congress with no legal effect. It was then left up to Congress to decide whether to exit the JCPOA and reimpose sanctions on Iran, with little sign on Capitol Hill of much appetite to do so. One reason was strong support for the Iran deal in a statement to Congress by more than 90 top US nuclear scientists including a designer of the hydrogen bomb and all three winners of the 2017 Nobel prize in physics. Stressing that Congress bore "momentous responsibilities", the proclamation dismissed Trump's call for renegotiation of the JCPOA as "unrealistic objective".⁵⁶ The scientists were joined in lobbying Congress by European parties to the agreement, with the UK, including its Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson, French, German and also EU diplomats working Capitol Hill hard and impressing upon dozens of Senators Europe's united and firm support for the JCPOA.

Judging the impact on policy of civil society more broadly speaking – especially in a continent-sized, pluralistic country such as the US – is obviously difficult in the best of times. Still, we can reasonably conclude that US businesses with investments or supply chains in Mexico or Canada or reliance on imported steel were acting as allies of Cohn or Mnuchin in the Trump administration's internal trade policy debates. Meanwhile, even Republicans in Congress were backstops to the Trump agenda, with John McCain casting the deciding vote on Trump's failed

⁵⁵ Quoted in de Vogue. "Judge blocks Trump's transgender military ban".

⁵⁶ Quoted in Gladstone, "Nuclear scientists urge Congress".

attempt to repeal Obamacare (the US federal health insurance scheme) and Bob Corker, the chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, breaking with Trump on a range of foreign policy questions.

Meanwhile, there have been signs that the Democratic party is emerging from its post-Hillary malaise. The Indivisible movement, a grassroots progressive mobilisation movement conceived by former Democratic Congressional staff, claimed nearly 6000 local chapters by late 2017, including in reliably 'red', Republican-dominated states such as Idaho and Wyoming.⁵⁷ The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee reported that candidate recruitment ahead of the 2018 mid-term US elections was far ahead of where it was at a similar stage of the electoral cycle prior to the 2016 election.

In short, the ideological basis on which the US supported and bolstered the postwar liberal order is now contested, probably as never before since the end of the Second World War. The Trump administration in many respects seems to have mimicked the George W. Bush administration by upsetting the balance of debates between different US foreign policy doctrines and embracing both ultra-aggressive Jacksonianism and (on trade) a highly isolationist form of Jeffersonianism. Regardless of how lasting Trump's impact will be, the bipartisanship on foreign policy that led to the Marshall Plan, the creation of the UN and NATO, and the progressive strengthening of international law on trade and human rights clearly will not reappear anytime soon, if ever. But where America positions itself in the liberal international order is not and will never be where Donald Trump would like to position it.

Conclusion

Whatever Alcaro might have right or wrong, he is on strong ground in claiming that "the liberal order is based on a paradox: US power is what has enabled it, and at the same what has hampered its most complete realisation".⁵⁸ The paradox points us towards three points by way of conclusion. The first is that Trump's Presidency in many, perhaps surprising, ways illustrates how continuity often trumps change in US foreign policy. Exceptions prove the rule, which brings to mind the enormously powerful shock to the liberal system that occurred on 11 September 2001. The response of the George W. Bush administration did much to undermine the idea that IR should be rules-based and seek both peace and justice in equal measure.

Its utter disregard for established rules – especially conventions on human rights and the treatment of foreign prisoners – clearly changed at least at the level of rhetoric and public diplomacy

⁵⁷ Tomasky, "The resistance so far", 42.

⁵⁸ Alcaro, "Liberal order and its contestations", x ???.

under Obama, who himself could be considered a foreign policy change agent. But Obama proved unable, say, to close Guantanamo Bay. Leaving aside the Iranian nuclear deal, there is little to cite when sifting through Obama's eight years in power to support the argument he extended or strengthened multilateralism. He and his administration repeatedly made clear their discontent with the EU and NATO. Obama did little or nothing to invest in his own Democratic Party as an institutional defender of the liberal order, and – in retrospect – facilitated the groundswell of populism that propelled Trump to the White House by neglecting the plight of Americans who globalisation had "left behind". Obama cannot be held responsible for the rise of Trump. It is far easier to find causation in 9/11 and all that came after it. But neither did Obama's Presidency accomplish much in terms of making the liberal international order less vulnerable to attack by a populist demagogue who could ride dissatisfaction with its effects as part of a successful US presidential campaign.

Second, the liberal international order may always have been more fragile than it appeared in the first decades of the 21st century. One result was dangerous assumptions about its resilience that led, for example, to Chinese adventurism in the South China Sea or Russia's brazen assertion of its interests in Crimea and Syria. In all of these cases, pushing at the boundaries set by a liberal international order may have seemed not to involve unbearable costs. By this reading, Trump's America is an almost logical consequence of a general US aversion post-9/11 to try to legitimise the liberal international order and mitigate the domestic political costs of defending it. IR theorists who privilege structure over agency in their explanations need obviously to re-examine their assumptions. Equally, liberals and constructivists might usefully question their own views about how much international society constrains states that violate its norms.

Third and finally, the embrace of illiberal nationalism now offers a viable political strategy for political leaders for whom the repression of dissent and abandonment of the rule of law is seductive. Others have shown that the strategy does not preclude societal gains, especially in terms of economic advancement. Arguably, the liberal international order relies fundamentally on the health of liberal democracies, in which politics involves compromise, open debate and respect for rules. After all, it was liberal democratic states – with the US in the lead – that built the order in the first place. But illiberal states – including China (witness Xi's defence of globalisation at Davos) and even Russia (given Europe's energy dependence on the free flow of Russian energy) – are still, perhaps unlikely, natural defenders of the liberal international order from which they benefit.

Ikenberry is surely right to argue that "Trump is less a cause than a consequence of the failings of liberal democracy".⁵⁹ We are now light years – in political terms – away from an era in

⁵⁹ Ikenberry, "Plot against American foreign policy", 3.

which liberal democracy could be termed (by Francis Fukuyama) “the final form of human government”.⁶⁰ It matters that “from a Western perspective, the 2008 meltdown was first and foremost an economic event. The rest of the world, however, regarded 2008 and its aftermath through a much wider aperture...the so-called global recession was primarily an Atlantic one”.⁶¹ All politics is local, and charity begins at home. The threat to the liberal order posed by the US under the Trump administration may be fleeting and temporary (four or fewer years). But it will not disappear until American power is put at the service of its own democracy, which must be renewed to become the example to the world that it used to be. What is perhaps most surprising about the rise of Donald Trump is how close that moment, when it happens, might well be.

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⁶⁰ Fukuyama, *The End of History*.

⁶¹ Luce, *The Retreat of Western Liberalism*, 974.

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